What Does "Black" Mean? Exploring the Epistemological Stranglehold of Racial Categorization *

DAVID L. BRUNSMA **
(Department of Sociology, University of Alabama in Huntsville)

KERRY ANN ROCKQUEMORE
(Department of Sociology, Boston College)

ABSTRACT

The "check all that apply" approach to race on the 2000 census has ignited a conceptual debate over the meaning and usefulness of racial categories. This debate is most intense over the category "black" because of the historically unique way that blackness has been defined. Though the lived reality of many people of color has changed over the past three decades, we question whether the construct black has mirrored these changes and if "black" remains a valid analytic or discursive unit today. While black racial group membership has historically been defined using the one-drop rule, we test the contemporary salience of this classification norm by examining racial identity construction among multiracial people. We find that that the one-drop rule has lost the power to determine racial identity, while the meaning of black is becoming increasingly multidimensional, varied, and

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** Direct all correspondence to: David L. Brunsma, Department of Sociology, University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, AL 35899. E-mail: brunsmad@email.uah.edu

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contextually specific. Ultimately, we argue that social, cultural and economic changes in post-Civil Rights America necessitate a re-evaluation of the validity of black as social construct and re-assessment of its' continued use in social science research.

The 2000 census was a watershed event in how we conceptualize "race" in America. The decision to allow individuals to check multiple categories when describing their racial identity has resulted in a statistical quagmire in which there are now 63 different racial categories (Grieco and Cassidy 2001). The "check all that apply" approach to race has also ignited a conceptual debate over the meaning and usefulness of racial categories. This debate is most intense over the category "black" because of the historically unique way that blackness has been defined.[1] While many thought the option would have little impact on the way that black people would self-identify, both demographers and politicians were surprised by early findings that more blacks than expected identified themselves as multiracial on their census forms. Nearly 1.8 million people checked black *and* at least one other race as an indication of their racial identity.[2] In addition to the statistical problems that have resulted from multiple race responses, recent changes in the census have set in motion a validity crisis that social scientists, politicians, and policy makers must engage. We believe the outcome of discussions concerning the validity of racial categories in general, and the construct black in particular, are at the heart of understanding present and future issues of race and identity in American society.

The construct *black* has been used in a variety of complex and contradictory ways in social science literature. Black has been considered to describe a common set of social experiences; *however,* it is not currently accurate in depicting a monolithic assemblage of similar situations and circumstances. The construct black historically has corresponded to issues of skin color that somehow bind individuals into a collective body; *however,* the empirical reality of phenotype is one of increasingly striking variation and heterogeneity, not similitude and homogeneity. Black has been used to signify a collective structural location typically associated with restricted

[1] Although we have great reservations about using terms such as "race," "black," "white" and "biracial" because they represent social constructions as opposed to biologically based human categories, we recognize that their use is necessary for the purpose of our argument. We must use standard racial terms in order to problematize their meaning, validity and continued use in social science research. Readers should interpret these terms as "concepts" (in quotes) that are not grounded in any empirically demonstrable, biological reality.

[2] Multiple race identification is most pronounced among young people, with 8 percent of blacks under 17 choosing more than one race as compared to only 2 percent of those 50 and older.

opportunities, economic disadvantage, and community disorganization; *however*, the opportunity structure has altered significantly over the past three decades and the socioeconomic status of black individuals is now quite varied. Black has been described as an expression of a unique cultural space with a particular collection of values, norms, and strategies; *however,* while many who write and think about race have rhetorically and theoretically articulated black culture, concomitant structural, historical and material changes have resulted in a wide variety of cultural spaces. The construct black, has also been used as an identity, a marker, a social category, a statement of self-understanding, indeed a socially imposed parameter of the self; *however,* the terrain of identity is increasingly multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic – a negotiated terrain not encapsulated in one colossal concept. While the lived reality of many people of color has changed since the passage of Civil Rights legislation, we question whether the construct black has mirrored these changes. In other words, given the many ways that black has been used in the past, does its' meaning remain a valid analytic or discursive unit today? [3]

As sociologists, we consider concepts to be valid to the extent that the descriptions of empirical reality they express are correct. Applying this assumption to racial categorization begs the question: are the ways that we understand "black" reflective of empirical reality? The answer to that question often depends on one's politics, theoretical orientation, discipline, profession, position in the class structure, and/or one's race. Though various interest groups may justify the existence of particular self-serving definitions of what black means, membership in a collective body should not alter consensus on the validity of a concept. Furthermore, the continued use of invalid constructs in research, policy debates, and public discourse results in their reification, affecting the very experiences of the individuals and groups that the original construct has misrepresented. Is it possible that the reification of black has reached such a plateau? By focusing on black as a social identity, we will argue that it has, necessitating a re-evaluation of the validity of black as a social construct and re-assessment of its' continued use in social science research.

Over the course of U.S. history, many social scientists have been primarily concerned with the question "*Who is black?*" making it possible to designate a population that could be tracked and studied. Framing the discourse in this way enabled an examination of the underlying racist

[3] Though we are framing the validity crisis in racial categorization in terms of contemporary social and cultural change, we recognize that these have *never* been valid constructs and have been challenged by sociologists from Du Bois (1898) to Zuberi (2001).

assumptions used to categorize individuals, while allowing for descriptive analyses of how a brutally marginalized group of people experienced the social world. As researchers interested in process, structure, and identity (as well as from the standpoint of validity concerns) we believe that the more salient question today is: *What does black mean*? The former question, *Who is black?*, invokes the power of social context over individual identity construction. Specifically, this question and the answer to it (most notably in Davis 1991), emphasize the power of social structure and racist ideology in establishing strict parameters of identity options available to individuals. Throughout U.S. history, racial identity has been legally, and later culturally determined by the one-drop rule, thereby giving individuals with any known black ancestry no choice other than to identify as black. While it is valuable to understand that historically rooted, structurally parameterized identity "options" reflect the social realities of individual's lives and their defined group memberships, dramatic reductions in structural barriers over the past three decades necessitate a shift away from how structure defines individual identity (Who is black?), towards an analysis of how closely individuals' racial self-understandings correspond to the unquestioned, all-encompassing, construct "black" frequently used by social scientists (What does black mean?). Considering the historical entrenchment of the one-drop rule and recent research on racial identity among mixed-race people, we wish to press social scientists to fundamentally reassess both the *meaning* and *validity* of the social construct black in the face of structural and cultural changes in the U.S.

In order to explore the validity of black as a social identity and its continued usefulness as an analytic construct, it is necessary to first consider the ideological foundation underlying black categorization in the U.S. After describing the socio-historical and economic roots of the one-drop rule, we will question its' contemporary salience in determining racial identity. To answer this question, we explore racial identity development among individuals with one black and one white parent. The in-between status of mixed-race people provides a critical case to test the strength of the one-drop rule, the meaning of black as a social identity and the validity of black as a social construct. Finally, we consider the implications of these findings on the continued use of the construct black for analytic purposes. The goal of this paper is to raise questions – uncomfortable questions – about our use of racial categories. It is, most importantly, an effort to critically approach: 1) the taken for granted system of racial categorization; 2) the underlying assumption that existing categories reflect a monolithic social reality; and 3) the continued usage of the construct black in social science research.

Racial Classification and the One-Drop Rule

The American system of racial stratification did not emerge spontaneously, but has deep roots in 18th century European classification schemes (Jordan 1968; Omi and Winant 1994; Smedley 1999), the eugenics movement (Kevles 1985; Zuberi 2001) and the racialized history of imperialism (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Omi and Winant 1994; Patterson 1982). Early colonists brought hierarchical understandings of human categorization to the "new world" and created social hierarchies based on their assessments of some individuals as sub-human. The system of slavery exaggerated existing ideas of racial difference and the inferiority of people of color, serving as a rationalization of the exploitation of Africans in America (Jordan 1968). That same racist ideology continued, in mutated form, after the emancipation of slaves, guaranteeing their subordinate status for generations (Feagin 2000). Here, we briefly trace the history of the *idea* of racial categorization to illustrate how the fallacy of race has been constructed by dominant groups, socially reproduced over generations, and remains embedded within the institutions, culture, and social consciousness of American society. It is this mythical idea of racial groups that necessitated the emergence of the one-drop rule to define who is black. Understanding the historical roots of this social process is essential to answering the question of what black means in post-Civil Rights America.

Racial Classification

The process of categorizing human beings into racialized types began with Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* (1735). His was a system of non-hierarchical categorization. Other systems followed, firmly rooted in the classical notion of the Great Chain of Being that ordered all things (from the inanimate to God) (Jordan 1968; Spencer 1999; Zuberi 2001). With rapidly expanding colonization, European systems of classification interfaced with the Great Chain of Being and eventually elevated the status of white Europeans, while marginalized others (particularly Africans) were deemed one minute step up from animals (Jordan 1968; Zuberi 2001). With the framework of racial classification schemes established, entire "populations" of people were neatly categorized. By extension, their correlate cultures, behaviors, and moral values were also hierarchically ordered. These racial hierarchies helped Europeans explain the differences they encountered, while justifying the colonization and enslavement of Africans and other non-European populations.

The Enlightenment ushered in suspicion of existing classification systems. That suspicion, however, was directed towards "scientifically testing" the existence of racial types. The collective European racial fantasy that differences, assumed in earlier cosmological and philosophical

hierarchies, were, in fact, embedded in observable cultural, behavioral, and biological differences resulted in the birth of social statistics.[4] Racial statistics relied on the eugenic assumption that race is genetic, unchangeable and determinative of the superiority of the white race (Zuberi 2001). Intrinsically aligned with white supremacist ideology, racial classification schemes provided an epistemological template for the "order of things." When this order became challenged, the ideology adapted to explain anomalies, subvert contrary evidence, and develop specific mechanisms for bringing deviations (e.g., mixed-race individuals) back into the explanatory framework of racial classification.

The One-Drop Rule

Europeans brought their hegemonic ideology of racial difference and white supremacy to North America, creating hierarchical social structures and setting the stage for the uniquely American form of slavery to emerge. We focus here on the definition of black, because the rules of inclusion in the "black race" are both different from any other group in the U.S., and inseparable from the social and economic institution of slavery. Specifically, black group membership has been defined by a strict application of the one-drop rule that deems individuals with any black ancestry whatsoever (regardless of their physical appearance) as members of the black race. The result is an inescapable pattern of hypodescent, where mixed-race individuals – no matter how far removed from black ancestry – have had the same position as the lower-status parent group.

Because slavery was built upon a strong white supremacist ideology of racial separation, miscegenation was strictly prohibited. The fear underlying anti-miscegenation attitudes was that black blood would taint the purity of the white race (Zack 1995). While whites publicly denounced miscegenation, white men practiced it with regularity by raping their female slaves (Blassingame 1972).[5] The children of these unions, in

[4] Closely related to the increased usage of racial statistics was the increase in census-taking. Utilizing existing racial classification schemes was, from its beginnings, a political tool to control populations, individualize society, and give rise to a new idea of "identity." Through the use of censuses, majority groups were able to collect various demographic data, along with racial data, further dividing and conquering their populations. By empirically substantiating false beliefs in racial difference, political, social, and material inequalities were legitimized. That these censuses rested on the fallacious process of racially classifying the population was never questioned. Census-taking, as a culturally-determined, hegemonic process, provided the necessary basis upon which to build racialized science and the racialized socialization of subsequent generations (Zuberi 2001).

[5] The slave-owning mentality included a belief that white male slave owners had the right to sexually "use" their black female slaves at will. As a result, the vast majority of interracial sex consisted of exploitative unions between white male slave owners and their black female

accordance with the one-drop rule, were considered black and, therefore, assets for the slave master (Davis 1991). It was this economic incentive, grounded in white supremacist logic, that validated the one-drop rule as the definition of blackness in the plantation dominated South.

The Civil War caused existing ideological divisions over slavery to become even more deeply entrenched and the socially constructed boundaries between blacks and whites were reinforced. At the war's conclusion, Southern whites accepted the one-drop rule and mulattos became even more closely aligned with blacks due to their increased alienation from whites (Williamson 1980). This alliance resulted in full acceptance of the one-drop rule by the American population (Davis 1991). Following the Civil War, the Jim Crow system of segregation enabled an unequivocal distinction to be made between the social worlds of blacks and whites. The passing of a multitude of segregation and anti-miscegenation laws in most states necessitated a legal definition of who, precisely, belonged in the category "black." It was at this time in history that the one-drop rule, previously an informal norm, was legally codified (Magnum 1940). The product of this was to make *de jure* a previously *de facto* cultural and social norm that had, for generations, dictated interactions between the races. It is imperative to keep in mind that the codification of the one-drop rule was necessary because of the reality of miscegenation in the context of white supremacy. Given widespread belief in the biological reality of racial groups, the scientific reification of racial classification, and the legal codification of the one-drop rule, the fallacy of race became further embedded in the national social consciousness. [6]

Considering the one-drop rule in its historical perspective, several patterns emerge. First and foremost, racial hierarchies have existed as

slaves (Blassingame 1972). Sexual intercourse between white women and black male slaves was strictly forbidden. This was largely due to problematic possibility that such a sexual union could produce a mixed-race child. A mulatto child in a white family was scandalous and threatened the entire ideological logic of the slave system. However, a mixed-race child in the slave quarters was not only tolerated but was considered an economic asset (Davis 1991).

[6] It is important to note that while the idea of race was deeply entrenched in our social and cultural consciousness, geneticists and biologists were dismantling it. By World War II, evidence from geneticists failed to support a biological basis of racial categories. The eugenics movement, however, further reified the idea of race through a paradigmatic shift to cultural and demographic racial differences. In other words, in light of empirical evidence that race is not a biological reality, eugenicists shifted their emphasis to observing racial patterns in behavior, culture and intelligence. Using racial statistics from census data, they studied the racial bases of various deviant behaviors and cultural deficiencies. The subtle shift from documenting the existence of racial groups, to the observation of racial patterns in various social behaviors and attitudes, was mirrored in the social sciences.

long as there has been contact between Europeans and Africans and they are firmly rooted in an ideology of white supremacy. In the U.S., the definition of who is black has consistently supported existing racist systems of stratification. Despite the fact that the one-drop rule has no basis in biological reality, and has been continually used as an ideological weapon to support the continued exploitation of African Americans, it has enjoyed near universal social acceptance.

Since the passage of Civil Rights legislation and the systematic (although not total) dismantling of structural barriers for people of color, the cultural space has emerged where the one-drop rule has been challenged – particularly among young multiracial people. Biracialism (via parentage) is not a new social phenomenon. What *is* new are their post-Civil Rights experiences of race. Such experiences have allowed a rejection of the one-drop rule and forced a reconsideration of the mutual exclusivity of racial categories. It is precisely because multiracial people's existence challenges the one-drop rule, and because their lived experiences of race question the very validity of black as a social construct, that we consider what black means in the context of their lives.

What Does Black Mean? – An Empirical Investigation

Over the past two decades, an increasing number of social scientists have begun to study multiracial people as distinct from the black population. Prior to this recent trend, strict adherence to the one-drop rule meant that researchers considered individuals with any black ancestry whatsoever as black. The new generation of researchers (many of whom themselves are multiracial) have accused their predecessors of over-reliance on the one-drop rule, questioning the salience of this norm as setting parameters for identity construction in the actual lives of mixed-race people. In order to investigate whether or not the one-drop rule continues to determine racial identification, we surveyed a non-random sample of 177 college students with one black and one white parent in the Detroit metropolitan area. If, in fact, the one-drop rule retains a hold on their racial identity development, we would expect that most (if not all) would identify as black. In order to provide the opportunity for their racial identity to vary (as multiracial researchers have suggested it would), we allowed respondents to racially identify themselves in various other ways.[7]

[7] The actual survey question we used was: "Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about your racial identity? A) I consider myself exclusively Black (or African-American); B) I sometimes consider myself Black, sometimes my other race, and sometimes biracial depending on the circumstances; C) I consider myself Biracial, but I experience the world as a Black person; D) I consider myself exclusively as Biracial (neither

Our respondents, whom we expected to identify as black in accordance with the one-drop rule, actually chose between numerous different racial identities. These included: a border identity (exclusively biracial), a singular identity (exclusively black or exclusively white), a protean identity (sometimes black, sometimes white, sometimes biracial), and a transcendent identity (no racial identity). Below we provide a brief overview of the each of the racial identities that our respondents chose, delineating important syntheses of, and divergences from, previous literature.[8] The purpose of this overview is: 1) to provide an interpretive perspective on the shifting nature of black as a racial category, 2) to further question the validity of the construct black, and 3) to underscore the importance of moving beyond the question "who is black?" to "what does 'black' mean?"

The Border Identity

Over sixty percent (61.3%) of respondents in our sample described their racial identity as neither exclusively black nor white, but as a unique combination of the two. For these respondents, the one-drop rule is not salient in determining racial identity, nor is black a personally meaningful construct. Instead, "black" is an intangible quality that is blended with an equally intangible "white" into a new hybrid category of social identity. We use the term "border identity" (Anzaldua 1987) because individuals choosing this option describe their racial identity as biracial, meaning a separate category of existence altogether.

The border identity is the racial identity option that has been privileged by multiracial activists because (to them) it embodies the need for separate categorization. They argue that because individuals no longer understand themselves as one race, additional categories are necessary in order to reflect existing demographic and social realities. Many multiracial identity researchers have also privileged this identity option over the traditional singular black identity (Brown 1990; Daniel 1996; Field 1996; Herring 1995; Poston 1990; Root 1990; Gibbs 1997). Root characterizes this new identity by the "ability to hold, merge, and respect multiple perspectives simultaneously" (1996: xxi) while Daniel refers to this option as a "blended identity" and describes it as one that "resists both the dichotomization and hierarchical valuation of African American and European American cultural and racial differences" (1996: 133).

Black nor White); E) I consider myself exclusively as my other race (not Black or biracial); F) Race is meaningless, I do not believe in racial identities; and, G) Other."

[8] For a more extensive discussion of the methodology and findings, see Rockquemore and Brunsma (2001).

The Singular Identity

Some of our respondents (16.7%) chose to racially self-identify with only one of the races in their background. They described their racial identity as either exclusively black *or* exclusively white. For these individuals, biracial was an accurate description of their ancestry but inaccurate in describing their racial identity. If asked, respondents who chose the singular identity readily shared that they have one black and one white parent, however such information did not determine their self-categorization and/or group membership. As might be expected, more of these respondents identified exclusively as black (13.1% of the total sample) than white (3.6% of the total sample).

The singular black identity, while frequently cited by Civil Rights leaders in opposition to the addition of a multiracial category to the 2000 census, has fallen out of favor with researchers studying mixed-race identity and is barely mentioned by multiracial activists as a legitimate identity option. Root (1990) refers to the singular black option as a biracial individual's "acceptance of the identity society assigns" (588) while Gibbs (1997) describes individuals having a black identity as "overidentified with their black parent" (332). Despite its disfavored status, the singular black identity continues to be a meaningful racial identity option for biracial individuals and evidence that the one-drop rule does remain salient in identity construction for some multiracial people.

Research documenting the existence of biracial people who self-identify as white is scarce (Bowles 1993; Root 1990, 1996) and often a topic of great discomfort for researchers. Due to the logic of the one-drop rule, a white identity is impossible because no amount of intermarriage or generational distance can remove an individual from the category black. Some consider the singular white identity to be equivalent to passing, yet we find the white identity choice to be a distinct phenomenon altogether. Passing implies that an individual identifies as black, yet pretends to be white for various social and economic reasons. The singular white identity that we found among our respondents differs because the individual truly considers their racial identity to be white (despite the fact that one of their parents is black). The existence of biracial people who self-identify as white circumvents the one-drop rule as a basis for racial categorization and creates further important questions about the meaning of black as a social identity. Are these individuals *really* black for categorization purposes because of their parentage? Is it equally legitimate for a multiracial person to choose an exclusively white vs. an exclusively black identity? And is there a generational and/or phenotypic marking point when an individual is no longer considered black in post Civil Rights America?

The Protean Identity

A small group of our respondents (4.8% of the total sample) chose, what we call, the protean identity option. Specifically, they described their racial identity as "sometimes black, sometimes white, and sometimes biracial depending on the situation". For them, black is meaningful as a social identity, yet it is but one of several racial identities. In this way, black loses mutual exclusivity and gains a situation-specific fluidity heretofore unknown. These respondents emphasize their unique capacity to move between and among black, white and biracial identities, calling forward whatever racial identity may be contextually appropriate.

Respondents choosing the protean identity believe that homogeneous groups of blacks and whites have distinct cultural patterns that require different social behaviors. They consider themselves to belong to multiple racial groups because they are knowledgeable of various cultural ways of being and are accepted as "insiders" by members of various racial groups. While some people might adjust their *behavior* to differing circumstances, our proteans adjust their *identity* to these different circumstances. Thus, every social situation is assessed for what racial identity will 'work' and then that particular identity is presented. It is their ability to posses and present multiple racial identities that distinguishes the proteans from the previously described groups. [9]

The Transcendent Identity

One final way that our respondents understand their racial identity is by refusing to have any racial identity whatsoever. In other words, some respondents (13.1% of the total sample) claim to have "transcended" race altogether. This approach to racial identity, while rarely mentioned in contemporary studies, is grounded in Park's (1950) Marginal Man where, by virtue of an in-between status, individuals intellectualize (as opposed to internalize) racial categorization. Failing to fit within the rigidly defined groupings of the existing system, transcendents consciously identify race as a master status that is external to their individual identity. While acknowledging the existence of the one-drop rule, they understand black only as a socially constructed category that is utterly meaningless to their individual sense of self.

[9] Although the protean strategy has been implied in the existing literature (Root 1990, 1996; Stephan 1992), there is little empirical substantiation. Daniel (1996) uses the term "integrative identity" to describe malleability among biracial people, suggesting that some may have the capacity to reference themselves *simultaneously* in black and white communities while functioning as an insider within these differing social groups.

Implications of a Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity

Our findings problematize the validity of black as a social identity in several ways. First and foremost, in this small non-random sample, we find not one, but five different racial identities (black, white, biracial, all of the above, and none of the above). To our respondents, "black" meant a great many different things. For some, black was co-opted into a new racial identity (the border option), for others it was discarded as meaningless (the singular white option), for others it was only meaningful in specific contexts (the protean option), and for others it was simply a socially constructed category that had no personal significance (the transcendent option). It is these varied responses that reaffirm the necessity of asking what does black mean?

More importantly, the findings imply a subtle, yet fundamental, shift in the application of the one-drop rule by our respondents and others in their social environments. Because our individual identities are interactionally-validated self understandings (Stone 1962), we can infer that each of these varied constructions of racial identity have developed in social contexts where they were deemed *legitimate* and *validated* by others. It is this interactional mechanism of validation that problematizes the validity of black because racial categorization (particularly as it is used for Civil Rights compliance and monitoring) hinges on the assumption that others categorize an individual as a member of a distinct racial group. If, in this small group of individuals, we found at least five different understandings of black, then black is a highly fluid construct. Overall, the findings of this study, and much that lies in the emerging literature on biracial identity, fails to support the idea that the one-drop rule remains salient in the way that multiracial people understand their own racial identity. In fact, our findings suggest that the grip of racial classification is loosening. Given that identity is a social process, we contend that Americans are beginning to view multiracial people in increasingly complex and fluid ways that problematize the validity of racial categories as we know them.

What Will Black Mean in the Future?

The "check all that apply" approach to racial identification used in the 2000 Census illustrates a seismic shift in our understanding of racial categories and racial group membership. In fact, the very *idea* of races as mutually exclusive, biologically real categorizations will never be the same again. By allowing individuals to mark more than one race, the Census Bureau has dealt a deadly blow to the idea that "pure" races exist, shattering the commonsensical notion of races as genetically distinct groupings of human beings. More importantly, the new approach casts serious doubt on the validity of races as social identities, because it implies

that individuals may no longer view themselves in mutually exclusive ways and, at a deeper level, that others may not view them as members of distinct racial groups. We believe the movement away from strictly defined, singular racial identities may be a shift towards a more contextualized understanding of the lived realities, experiential circumstances, social locations, and structural influences operating in our society.

A change in how we understand racial identity and group membership is, for some, long overdue and, for others, a bit pre-mature. Irrespective of politics or personal opinions, the governmental decision to allow the "check all that apply" option has forced social scientists, government bureaucrats, and pollsters to question the validity of racial constructs in general, and black in particular. What, in fact, does black represent after generations of racial mixing, inter-marriage, changing structural locations, within group diversification, a fluid cultural space, and increasing multidimensionality in self-identification? The assumption underlying the use of longstanding racial categorizations in research, legislation, and public discourse is that each represents a fundamental commonality, a monolithic group experience that captures social, cultural, and phenotypic distinctions between U.S. citizens. However, the ongoing use of racial categories as meaningful designations stands in stark contrast to the fact that social scientists have long agreed that racial groupings are not grounded in biological reality.

Though sociologists know that race is not biologically real, we have continued to use racial categorizations because of the belief that they represent a fundamental *social* reality (Omi and Winant 1994). Despite decreasing structural barriers since the passage of Civil Rights legislation, African-Americans continue to experience residential segregation, educational inequalities, and discrimination in mortgage lending, the criminal justice system, and the labor market. In addition to these institutionally rooted inequalities, race continues to affect the way individuals perceive each other and their social interactions on a daily basis. As Dalmage pointedly states: "while there may be one [human] race, only some members of that race can catch a cab on 42nd street" (2000: 13). Her observation illustrates the way that biological fantasy becomes social reality in the context of daily interactions. It is this lingering social reality of race that has led many to argue that the census racial categorizations are necessary and inherently meaningful designations. In other words, black remains an unquestioned construct because it represents a profound *social* identity: it accurately describes how individuals understand themselves and how they are understood by others.

The reality of black as representing a social identity must be called into question due to the fact that 1) the U.S. government no longer supports

the idea of exclusive racial categorization and 2) there exists a growing proportion of the black population who no longer view themselves as black. We have demonstrated that there are at least five different racial identities among people who (according to the one-drop rule) are black. Given the multidimensional nature of racial identity among mixed-race people, the new census data is even more alarming than at first glance. Specifically, our respondents indicated various identification strategies for the census. The border identifiers would be among those who indicated more than one race. However, the singular white identifiers checked white, the singular blacks checked black, the proteans checked whatever they felt at the moment and the transcendents left the question blank. Therefore, we should be aware that the census data (and estimates of the size of various populations derived from it) are inherently flawed because they fail to take into account the subjective elements of identity choice.

Considering increasing cultural and demographic fluidity in our understandings of race can we, in fact, continue to assert with certainty that the construct black is valid? In our theoretical and empirical models what does black measure? What would it mean to sociological research to expand categorization? Is it possible (or wise) to do away with reified categories altogether? How can and how should sociologists adjust to more porous notions of racial identity? Below we consider some of these important questions, with the hope that their mere articulation will energize discussion within the discipline over the legitimacy and validity of our continued reliance on racial categories for empirical analysis.

What Does Black Measure?

Despite the fact that research on multiracial individuals and the new census data are pushing us all to rethink racial classification and identity, the hegemonic systems of the last 300 years have not completely released their hold. The general societal conception of race is still one of biologically, culturally, materially, and phenotypically rooted difference and distinction. The original line of research on the question *Who is black* was important for understanding the contextually bound nature of racial classifications and definitions. The culmination of evidence and arguments that race is *not* based in biological or ontological reality, however, has done little to change the way sociologists talk about and conduct research using racial statistics.

Social science has, over time, oscillated between various essentialist arguments. These arguments span biological (see Wiegman 1995), cultural (see Smedley 1999), evolutionary (see Darity Jr. 1994; Hoffman 1896; Spencer 1885), assimilationist (Frazier 1957; Park 1950), behavioral (Myrdal 1944), and social constructionist (see Ferber 1995; Lopez 1995) approaches to race. Currently, sociologists tend to favor the social

constructionist perspective; however, even those who rely on this explanation of race continue to operate according to an essentialist view of race (Spencer 1999; Zuberi 2001). According to Spencer:

> … if race is a social construction, of what precisely is it constructed if not the scientifically invalid false consciousness of biological race? It is as vitally necessary to problematize the social construction of race as it was to question its scientific construction. Many people believe erroneously in a biological conception of race, but it is critical to see that even for those people who claim to eschew the biological conception in favor of a social one, the basis of their social construction view is an underlying conception of biological race, whether acknowledged consciously or not. This false consciousness serves to keep Americans fixated on what are thought to be racial differences, exaggerating and ultimately reifying such differences into a so-called social reality. (1999: 37-38)

In the practice of empirical social science, the social contructionist approach allows researchers to remain uncritical of race as a construct, maintain their biological and essentialist view of racial differences, and continue to accept the invalid schemas of racial classification and categorization (Appiah and Gutman 1996). Race in general, and black/non-black in particular, are used as "control variables," and, indeed, as just one in an ever-growing array of causal variables for our statistical models of exceedingly complex social phenomena. We remain, for the most part, inattentive to each and every one of these types of exogenous variables – including them in models as part of an unquestioned routine. Subsequently, the language that we use to discuss the "effects" of "variables" such as race in our empirical models is a language deeply fixated on the notions of race and racial difference that we, at least theoretically, eschew. There are several dimensions of sociologists' usage of racial concepts and statistics that deserve our immediate attention.

First, we must reconsider and problematize the causal language used in discussing "race effects." The starting place is situated in sociologists' confusion over causation and association (Zuberi 2001). As illustrated in our findings on biracial individuals, race is *not* an unalterable characteristic of an individual. Historically, racial categories have been constructed from false, illogical, and mythical assumptions regarding the biological, cultural, and behavioral bases of racial groups. If one assumes that race is an unalterable characteristics of individuals, then the bulk of research on racial differences and the "effects of race" have been fundamentally misguided. Zuberi states:

> Race and gender as unalterable characteristics of individuals are not causal variables in inferential statistical analysis. Statisticians have questioned and

> criticized the use of such attributed – unalterable properties of individuals – in inferential statistical models. Most social statisticians, however, continue to treat race and sex as an individual attribute in their inferential models. *Statistical models that present race as a cause are really statements of association between the racial classification and a predictor or explanatory variable across individuals in a population. To treat these models as causal or inferential is a form of racial reasoning.* (Zuberi 2001: 129, emphasis in original)

By failing to acknowledge the validity issues inherent in the use of race as a "variable," by viewing blackness, for example, as an unalterable characteristic, and, by assigning causal properties to race through interpretations of statistical relationships, sociologists have further reified the essentialist notion of race.

Even if social scientists, when using race as a predictor in statistical models, can become more discerning in their causal language and work towards a more critical understanding of their own interpretations of the associations observed in data, there remains the *assumption* that race is a proxy for other social, cultural, and behavioral traits. Any concerted attempts to move away from considering race as a *cause* must also include a critical assessment of the assumptions that race stands as a *proxy*. Race, as a variable, must be placed within a social context where its meaning resides. As a proxy, race currently is *associated* with a *wide* and *varying* number of social phenomena. Social researchers concerned about the validity and implications of their research would do well to cease using race as a proxy for other associated causes in their models and begin *measuring*, directly, those other causes.

There is also the persistent issue of "controlling" for other variations in statistical modeling. Much of the research on "race effects" tries to "explain away" the effect of race (e.g., a dummy variable for black, with whites as the omitted category) through the addition of other variables to the model. Typically, the differences assumed to be "caused" by the "black dummy variable" are actually due, or so it is argued, to these new variables. While this procedure is understood as interpreting race as a cause, it continues to legitimate the use of essentialist racialized reasoning and legitimate the use of methodologies that actually perpetuate the very problems we seek to overcome through our research. For while black as a construct may point to a reality, it consistently misses the mark, leaving researchers stuck in routine explanations and interpretations based on the usage of questionable concepts.

Possibly the more poignant question is what does black *not* measure. It fails to measure how others identify an individual or how individuals are perceived in society. This is no small matter given that many important usages of racial data assume that an individual designated as black appears

to others, and is identified by others, as black. Core substantive questions must be addressed as to how we can use census racial data in meaningful ways for Civil Rights monitoring and compliance. For example, if someone who identifies as multiracial, but looks black, experiences discrimination, is it because they were assumed to be black or because they were assumed to be multiracial? Does the distinction matter? Can someone experience discrimination if they identify as black, are multiracial by parentage, but appear white to others? And how do these same types of questions affect the way that we measure differences between groups on various dependent variables of interest, how we categorize individuals who have parents of different races for population estimates, and/or what we do with people who claim three or more racial identities?

What Would It Mean To Expand Categorization and This Is Desirable?

In response to concerns about the validity of black as a social identity, two possibilities exist. Indeed, both have been discussed in the literature – one working within the existing illogic of racial classification, the other pushing towards the erosion of the concept of race altogether. The first possibility is to further expand existing racial categories. The "check all that apply" compromise to the 2000 census is an example of efforts to refine the operationalization of racial concepts, increase the validity of racial constructs (by allowing multidimensionality), and enable multiracial populations to be extracted for separate analyses. If the system of racial classification was initially created to provide compatible, non-duplicated, exchangeable racial data among federal agencies, then expanding categories increases the demographic accuracy of that data (at least in terms of self-identification). Increasingly complex racial designations may simply require more refined statistical techniques and clearer bureaucratic guidelines for when to aggregate and disaggregate the data.

Another possibility is to reassess the use and value of racial categorization altogether. Many have argued that the system is collapsing under its own illogical weight. If, in fact, racial categories are not biologically real, and are increasingly failing to be socially meaningful, then adding more refined designations only compounds the problem, as opposed to providing any solution. Appiah made this critique when he stated that the "Multiracial scheme, which is meant to solve anomalies, simply creates more anomalies of its own, and that's because the fundamental concept – that you should be able to assign every American to one of three or four races reliably – is crazy." (Wright 1994: 49). The re-assessment of racial categorization is most strongly advocated by proponents of antiracial philosophy (see Spencer 1999) who seek to eliminate the illogical, hegemonic, false, and invalid concept of race. Scholars urging an end to the idea of race are, however, cautious in acknowledging that while race is a fallacy, racism

is an empirical reality that cannot be ignored. To combat racism without the reification of invalid racial categories, Zuberi (2001) has argued that social scientists must develop new ways of tracking discrimination, while refocusing empirical analyses to examine the factors *directly* that we now *assume* race (as a variable) is a proxy for (e.g., social class). Underlying this second possibility is the fundamental concern that the validity of black as a social construct has been severely diminished (if not mortally wounded) by the newly emerging racial identities reflected in the 2000 census data. The long held allegiance to one-drop rule seems to be eroding in the context of structural, cultural and economic changes in American society.

Ultimately, the way that we answer the question "what does black mean?" directly reflects the state of race relations in America. The fact that our rigid understandings of race are slowly yielding to more fluid notions of group membership mirrors the awkward position of racial categories in the new millennium. They are simultaneously real and unreal, both a biological fallacy and an increasingly complex social reality, differentiating individuals' opportunities and life chances, yet varying within groups. Viewed through this lens, the "check all that apply" option was a step forward in acknowledging the constructed nature of black as a social construct. The subsequent decision that multiracial responses would be collapsed back into the traditional categories for bureaucratic use is a step backward, albeit an acknowledgement of our continued need to find other ways to monitor racial discrimination. This oscillation indicates a crisis, one that begs a discussion of the meaning of racial categories and their place in our discipline.

Amidst all these uncertainties, one thing remains clear – the "check all that apply" directive on the 2000 census was not unlike opening Pandora's box. There simply is no closing it and pretending it did not happen. While the Census Bureau and various government agencies are left to deal with the bureaucratic and statistical mess resulting from multiple race responses, sociologists are left to consider the status of black as a social construct and the implications our answer has for future analyses. Given the existing population trends, the controversy over what black means, whether (or not) we continue to consider social problems through this lens, and the political implications of these decisions loom large and show no signs of abating.

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